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ABSTRACT

Educational psychologists have not been attending or responding to some changes occurring in American education, specifically, the increased number of adults who have become learners. Both developmental and learning research developed because of early school needs in addition to general experimental foci: adolescents and youth have long been the focus of the "helping" psychologists, and measurement has served as the research tool. The focus of research should not be placed on the most neglected age group (30-50) and on the phenomena most directly related to learning and instruction in this group. A review of the significant body of data from three decades of gerontological research suggests a need for future study in the areas of life-span psychology, adult education, and industrial training. (Author)

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Educational Psychology and Grown-ups

For 1980 APA Symposium: Challenge of Mature Adult Learners to Educational Psychology

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Educational psychology has a long and honorable history of a century or more of contribution to American education. It remains a reasonably healthy discipline, but has fallen upon the hard times that afflict most academic specialties today -- too little research money, a clouded future, and a slow market for new practitioners. One reason this is so is that educational psychologists have not been attending, or at least responding, to some of the changes that are occurring in American education; specifically, the "graying" of our national population of learners. In one way our discipline exhibits the rigidity that is (not entirely accurately) attributed to old age: that is, in its refusal to concern itself with learners beyond adolescence. It is as if occupational psychologists were assuming in 1980 that all engineers, lawyers and executives were male, and that when females completed high school or college, they became home-bound housewives and mothers. Our discipline will not flourish or remain healthy if it continues to live in the past.

Is the neglect of adults as complete as I suggest? I think so. For example, I examined seven currently-popular educational psychology texts used in college and university classes. One of the seven texts devoted a page to adults; unfortunately (from my point of view at least) the coverage consisted of abstracts from a journalistic best-seller on life-crises. Another text devoted an entire quarter-page to adults; they were described as "anxious". That was it. If text writers are uninterested in and ignorant of adults, they can be excused in part because the researchers and scholars who write for our journals do not provide them with any stimulation or data. I examined the last four volumes (vols. 68-71) of our discipline's oldest journal, the Journal of Educational Psychology. From 1976 to the present, one study was published in which

adults were used as research subjects. I then examined issues of the same period (Vols. 1-4) of Contemporary Educational Psychology, and found no studies at all of adults. (I should note, however, that the Fall issue of this journal will be devoted entirely to a symposium on the topic of adult learners). I then looked at another new journal, the International Journal of Educational Gerontology. This periodical is concerned with theoretical and policy considerations as well as with effective practices in teaching old people. I found five articles here that I could define as educational psychology research, and these all referred, quite appropriately, to aged subjects rather than to adults in mid-life. The description of the contents of these journals is in no way a criticism of any of them (I am a member of the editorial board of one of them) but simply a documentation of the fact that educational psychologists in general see themselves as practitioners of kiddie-psych.

But, one might ask, "Are there really enough adults engaged in some kind of study to warrant our professional attention?" The answer is an emphatic "Yes!" My colleague, Ed Ansello, will discuss the dimensions of the market in a succeeding paper, but in number (and in budget dollars) probably more adults are involved in learning than are children in public schools: job-training and re-training, self-improvement, new career development or enhancement, recreational and hobby study includes millions of adults -- and millions of dollars. Surely it would be mutually profitable if we were to apply our competence to the needs of the planners and instructors who teach these grown-up learners.

How is it that educational psychology has failed to adapt to the social and population changes that have extended structured learning experiences into the entire lifespan? There seem to me to be at least two reasons, one historical, the other rooted in the nature of the educational psychologist's academic experience.

As I have suggested in an earlier paper (Charles, 1977), educational psychology grew out of and adapted to the needs of a society changing very rapidly through the early years of this century. Schools were forced to cope with hordes of new kinds of children: mandatory attendance brought in the previously unschooled, Americans decided schooling held the promise of the future for their children, and wave after wave of immigrants brought in children with language and cultural deficiencies. Formal schooling extended over more and more years: from a short exposure to the one-room school, to eight grades, to twelve, and so on. At any rate, it became clear to psychologists that their business was helping public schools cope with the learning problems of children, and then of adolescents. Thus in the light of decades of experience, it was implicit that any learner who was (a) not in a school, or (b) was not a child or adolescent, was not a fit subject of concern. That the mature, middle-aged and older learners in our society are continuing an educational trend that has existed all though the century has not caught the attention of educational psychologists.

Nothing in the academic training or daily experience of the academic educational psychologist would encourage him or her to look beyond past practices. Normal academic conservatism tells the young professor, "Keep on doing what your major professor did, but use fancier statistics". Insitutional pressures to publish have increased, especially since the

1960's. The normal response of the educational psychologist has been to come up with a researchable idea, get into the nearest elementary school classroom and try it out; if everything goes well, write it up and go after the next one. In addition, there has been up until recently quite a lot of money around to examine specific problems of the schools. For a young researcher to go out and find real adults running around loose (and they are elusive) and concern him or herself with something no other educational psychologist was interested in would have been foolhardy and probably career damaging. Thus when editors get a study in the mail using "adult" subjects, these almost always turn out to be college sophomores -- usually from Education classes. They are "adult" in some ways, but they are not the learners of concern here.

For whatever reasons, we do not at present have an educational psychology that is applicable to adults. Can we have? Must we start at zero? Obviously, the answer to the first question is yes, if we wish to and will work. The answer to the second question is more complex, but in general we can say no, we need not start at zero; there is much to build on. In the rest of this introductory paper, I shall review what seems to me to be significant developments of the past. Then Morris Okun will evaluate recent and current work in learning and memory, followed by Shawn Glynn, who will consider learning theory and adult cognitive development.

First, while it may seem anomalous in this gathering, we need to specify what we include in educational psychology. A couple of years ago, John Feldhusen (1978) identified 20 topics usually taught in educational psychology, and then asked professionals to evaluate them. Learning processes, learning outcomes, test and measurements and motivation were

at the top of the list. Bob Grinder pointed out (1978) that educational psychology has lost the psychology of school subjects to elementary and secondary curriculum courses, Special Education has taken over exceptionality, counselor education has acquired clinical and counseling training: what is left is human development, learning, school psychology, and statistics. (One must observe that each of these has a separate existence outside psychology as well). From these two leaders we can summarize our principal areas of concern: developmental psychology, learning, instruction, tests and measurements (including statistics) and motivation. It seems unlikely that school psychology as now conceived could be extrapolated into maturity and old age, and motivation can usefully be considered in both learning and instruction. Quantitative work is somewhat "age-free", but that is not true of tests. In general, testers have ignored the post-college age population about as successfully as have educational psychologists in general. Test content, form, time limits and norm sources all affect evaluation of adult learners, but the knowledge that this is so has not stimulated corrective approaches. Instructional techniques in the education of adults have been pretty much the province of professional educators, business and industrial trainers, and similar persons, with little contribution or involvement of psychologists. There are exceptions (e.g., Knox, 1977) but they are recent and few. Let us turn then to the principal topics that have attracted psychologists interested in life beyond youth: development and learning.

We may start where so much of our discipline originated: with Edward Thorndike. In 1928, he published a volume of research called Adult Learning. This was truly "adult" and not like most post-youth research, "gerontic", in that his subjects were students from adult

evening schools, prisoners, and secretarial students aged 25 to 45. Both Thorndike and Hollingworth (1927) lamented the lack of good data on adults. At about the same time, industrial psychologist Walter Miles, became concerned over the plight of middle-aged workers in California who were having trouble finding employment. He became part of a committee at Stanford (including Terman, Stone, and Strong) set up to study the capacities and characteristics of middle-aged workers. The committee members and their doctoral students produced a number of books and journal studies on the topic in the next few years. Some similar work was done at Columbia and elsewhere (Birren, 1961, p. 131). But the coming of World War II ended this enterprise.

Gerontology

Immediately after World War II, gerontological research and practice began to flourish. In England, it began with the establishment of the Nuffield Institute, whose original purpose was to determine the competence, skills and trainability of older workers in those labor-short times. In the United States, work was less focused but caught the interest of scientists from many disciplines, and gained some support of Federal money. Duke University focused on neurological and psychiatric disorders of aging. Chicago pioneered in socially-oriented studies of mid-life and old age. The multi-disciplinary Andrus Center at U.S.C. has developed in many directions in the few years of its existence. Other institutes as well as scores of individual scientists have added to the growing body of research.

Psychologists in the aging field have emphasized abilities, learning, and memory perhaps more than any other aspect of behavior. Much of the laboratory work of the 1960's and 1970's consisted of traditional

verbal-learning studies, paralleling those carried out on the ubiquitous sophomore, but some of the work bears more direct relation to the kind of learning that we concern ourselves with in the classroom.

I looked at the last four years (Vols. 31-35) of the pricipal scientific publication of the Gerontological Society, the Journal of Gerontology. In these volumes I identified 18 studies of an educational psychology nature, generally learning and memory studies, all using as subjects old people, usually defined as past 65. Two added studies included as subjects adults between the ages of 30 and 50. This illustrates the problem of gerontology as a source of data for an educational psychology of adulthood. Subject sources for the old age studies includes three sets of subjects from senior centers, four sets of paid subjects from community groups, clubs and the like, six sets of similar but unpaid volunteer subjects, one set from a nursing home and one unidertified. By and large, these are not the adult learners we most need to know about. Aged persons are involved in learning experiences but not to any great extent in the more vital and mainstream study that goes on in our colleges, businesses and industries, and professional schools.

A high proportion of these and similar studies use college sophomores as control or comparison subjects. Usually, it is possible in the conclusion of one of these studies to describe ways in which the young have performed better than the old -- at least faster. This is all well and good, but there are two hazards lurking in the interpretation of such data:

1. It is tempting to assume that if the mean performance at 70 years in our subject population is at 60 units, and the mean performance of 20-year-olds is at 80 units, then 45-year-olds will be at 70, right?

2. It is also tempting to assume that if the 20 year-olds survive another 50 years and are re-tested, they will score at 60, right? Well, maybe. But it isn't that simple. Let me hasten to add that the authors of these studies do not make such assumptions (nor would their editors allow them to), they know better. But many casual readers of the literature of aging research do make these assumptions, and report their "data-based" inferences in textbooks (I have observed several of these error in recent books), and the same is true of more popular publications.

The problem is of course that age changes are not the same as, nor are they predicted by age differences. We can have quite accurate assessments of the difference between 20 year-old performance on a given task and that of 70 year-olds, and we can use such information in dealing with either group, but we cannot assume that the young will become like the old in time, nor that 45 year-olds are going to be midway between the two. The reason one group is different than the other may lie in some social or experiential characteristic, rather than in the chronological age of the subjects. For example, in much research on abilities and cognitive performance, most differences (except speed) disappear if level of education is controlled. In our society, almost any volunteer or cross-section group of old people will have significantly lower levels of education than a group of young people; the characteristic lies in the cohort, not in age. (Good discussions of these problems may be found in many current books; one useful source is Baltes, Reese, and Nesselroade, 1977.)

Life-span Psychology

There have always been a few developmentalists interested in the entire life-span: the late John E. Anderson of Minnesota and Sidney Pressey of Ohio State are notable among them. But in the last decade or

so, developmental psychologists have increasingly been extending their interests beyond youth, and at this time, most new texts in the field are described as "life-span", even though many are obviously written by people who know little of psychological development past childhood. (One example that came to my office this Spring takes care of "Adulthood and Aging" in an "Epilogue" of nine pages!) But many of them are excellent. For I believe the first time, the Annual Review had a section on the life-span (Baltes, Reese, and Lipsett, 1980).

Much of the stimulation for this movement has come from conferences on the topic, begun at the University of West Virginia a decade ago, resulting in a series of scholarly books summarizing present and past knowledge in the area, considering theories and problems, and pointing the way to future research in all aspects of development. (The series is entitled Life-Span Developmental Psychology, and has been published by Academic Press, with the first volume dated 1970). Cognition, learning, measurement and other topics vital to an educational psychology of adulthood are major concerns of the life-span developmentalists. This seems an appropriate source of help.

Adult Education

Most colleges of education have an adult education department; the term usually refers to classes offered by university extension divisions, or evening classes given by community colleges and high schools. There are numerous journals devoted to the topic, but most the content of these journals has to do with promotion, administration, classroom practices and the like. Some, however, is of a psychological nature.

Industrial Training

The training and retraining of workers is a very large enterprise, perhaps as large or larger than the whole public school operation. Since

an efficient work-force is a business asset, trainers are not, unlike academicians, eager to rush into print with descriptions of their methods or evaluations. But some such material appears in technical and trade journals.

Conclusion

To summarize, education and teaching-learning experiences have continued their historical tendency to extend further and further into the life-span, until at the present we truly have lifetime learning. But educational psychologists have been unaware or uninterested in this phenomenon and have remained devoted exclusively to public schools and to children and adolescents. Our time is not a healthy one for academic specialists in general or educational psychologists in particular; it would seem that offering the skills and competence of professional educational psychologists to the vast enterprise of educating and training adults would benefit society in general and open a door to a very large new market for our graduates.

But we must have something to offer. The gerontology movement provides us with 30 years of accumulated research, but the data are generally obtained from quite old subjects and may not be applied safely to younger subjects, or indeed to different groups of old people. Both education and industry have an interest in adult learning, but have published little of value to educational psychology. Life-span developmental psychologists are concerned with all ages and thus with the mature person who interests us, and thus have produced valuable data. But their interests are not identical to those of educational psychologists, so many gaps exist.

What is needed, obviously, is that we abstract from the aforementioned fields such data, hypotheses, models or theories as may be useful to us,

determine what we don't, but should, know and proceed to do the appropriate research. On the applied side, we have much to offer educators and trainers of adults right now, and need to make known and offer our skills appropriately.

The succeeding papers in this symposium will summarize and review our present, starting position.

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